

**Democratic Leadership and Inclusive Practices in Nigerian Universities**Abiola, Oluwatayomi Ajibade<sup>1</sup>, Ouma, Caren Akomo<sup>2</sup>, and Oduol, Truphena<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup>Pan Africa Christian University, Kenya<sup>2</sup>United States International University Kenya<sup>3</sup>United States International University Kenya**Abstract**

Educational leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering inclusivity within multicultural learning environments. This qualitative study explores how participative democratic leadership practices influence inclusivity and equity among diverse staff and student populations in Nigerian universities. Drawing inspiration from the broader framework of democratic leadership, the study emphasizes participative decision-making, collaboration, follower motivation, and teamwork as mechanisms that shape inclusive academic cultures. Using purposive sampling, interviews were conducted with educational leaders across selected universities in Southwest Nigeria. Thematic analysis revealed that leaders who prioritize shared governance, open communication, and equity-based decision-making create more inclusive environments that enhance belonging, representation, and cultural understanding. The study concludes that participative democratic leadership not only facilitates collective responsibility but also reinforces institutional fairness through social justice values. It recommends that university leaders integrate participatory approaches into governance structures to ensure inclusive practices in policy development, curriculum design, and staff-student engagement.

*Keywords:* Democratic leadership, inclusion, social justice, Nigerian universities.

**Introduction**

Introduction Universities across the world are increasingly challenged by how to manage cultural diversity within complex and heterogeneous academic environments. As

global institutions, universities bring together people from different ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socio-cultural backgrounds, and are often expected to model inclusion, equity, and social cohesion. However, the

promise of inclusivity in many higher education systems is undermined by structural inequalities, political influence, and leadership practices that privilege exclusion rather than collaboration (Abdulkareem & Oyenuga, 2019; Dawson et al., 2022).

In Europe and North America, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, universities continue to struggle with issues of racial inequality, representation of minority groups in leadership, and unequal access to opportunities, despite long-standing policies on diversity and inclusion. Studies from these contexts show that marginalized groups often experience subtle exclusion in decision-making, curriculum design, and institutional governance. Similarly, in parts of Asia and the Middle East, higher education institutions face challenges related to ethnic hierarchies, religious divisions, and centralized leadership systems that limit inclusive participation. These global experiences suggest that diversity alone does not guarantee inclusion; rather, leadership approaches play a critical role in shaping equitable academic environments.

Across Africa, universities reflect the continent's deep ethnic, cultural, and

linguistic diversity. In South Africa, for example, higher education institutions continue to confront the legacy of apartheid, with ongoing concerns about racial transformation, inclusion, and power relations within university leadership. In West Africa, including countries such as Ghana and Nigeria, universities similarly experience tensions linked to ethnicity, religion, and regional identity, which influence access to leadership positions and institutional resources. Within Nigeria, many universities exhibit patterns of favoritism, ethnocentrism, and exclusion that limit fair representation and equal opportunity for minority groups (Edewor & Aluko, 2020). Students and staff from minority ethnic or religious groups often report marginalization in leadership appointments, admission processes, and academic participation (Idowu & Esuabana, 2020). In Nigeria, leadership in universities has traditionally been hierarchical, emphasizing control and authority over participation. Yet, in a context characterized by ethnic pluralism and socio-cultural diversity, such centralized forms of leadership have proven inadequate for promoting inclusion and trust (Christiana & Moses, 2018). Nigerian universities,

therefore, require leadership models that encourage diversity of thought, promote intercultural dialogue, and uphold the principles of social justice.

Recent research suggests that democratic leadership offers a sustainable model for addressing these challenges (Dike & Madubueze, 2019; Northouse, 2021). By engaging all members of the university community in decision-making, democratic leadership enhances fairness, shared ownership, and a sense of belonging, all of which are fundamental to inclusive practices (Fakhri et al., 2021). Inclusive practices in academic institutions extend beyond token representation. They involve ensuring that staff and students from all cultural and socio-economic backgrounds are valued, heard, and empowered to contribute meaningfully to institutional growth (Sibanda & Majola, 2023). For democratic leadership to effectively promote inclusive practices, it must move beyond procedural consultation and reflect genuine collaboration grounded in respect and mutual accountability.

Although democratic leadership is promoted as a viable strategy for inclusion, its implementation in Nigerian universities has been inconsistent. University leaders often

express participative values while maintaining autocratic practices, making decisions without meaningful consultation with faculty or students (Abdullahi, 2021). This contradiction weakens institutional trust and undermines collaboration. Furthermore, existing administrative frameworks do not always support inclusive governance, as political interference and centralized power structures limit leaders' autonomy to practice participative decision-making (Christiana & Moses, 2018; Madaki, 2019). Previous studies on democratic leadership in universities have not sufficiently examined its role in promoting inclusion. Given Nigeria's multicultural context, understanding this relationship is essential for building equitable universities that foster both academic excellence and social cohesion. This study therefore investigates how democratic leadership can be effectively employed to promote inclusivity, belonging, and equitable participation in Nigerian universities.

### **Literature Review**

Democratic leadership in higher education has increasingly been linked to participation, shared decision making, and institutional

inclusion. Recent scholarship shows that leadership is no longer viewed as positional authority alone but as a relational process that influences how members experience belonging and fairness. A scoping review of leadership education frameworks in universities found that leadership definitions now emphasize collaboration, values, and shared responsibility rather than control or hierarchy (Rodríguez-Feria et al., 2023). This shift reflects a broader movement toward participative governance in academic settings. In Nigeria, leadership and management competencies were identified as essential for institutional effectiveness and equitable practice (Oninla et al., 2025). The study highlighted that stakeholders strongly support leadership approaches that encourage fairness and shared engagement. Leadership development literature also stresses the need for common language and integrated frameworks that promote collaboration across institutional levels (Barry et al., 2019). These perspectives suggest that democratic leadership provides structures that allow diverse voices to contribute to governance. When leaders actively involve staff and students in decisions, trust and institutional cohesion tend to increase. This body of

literature establishes democratic leadership as a participative and value driven approach that supports inclusive institutional cultures. Inclusive practices in universities are closely connected to how leadership responds to diversity and social accountability. Social accountability literature explains that institutions must align their policies and actions with societal needs and equity concerns (Abdalla et al., 2024). This approach requires leaders to ensure that marginalized groups are not excluded from academic opportunities. Research on diversity initiatives shows that inclusion programs often face financial and structural resistance, yet their presence remains vital for equitable education (Karra et al., 2020). Similarly, disability inclusion studies reveal that many institutions provide limited preparation for addressing the needs of persons with disabilities, which signals gaps in inclusive governance (Jordan & Petersen, 2023). These findings show that inclusive practice is not automatic but requires deliberate leadership commitment. When leadership structures prioritize representation, fairness, and accommodation, institutional cultures become more supportive. Inclusion therefore depends on

leaders who are willing to embed equity into policy, curriculum, and decision-making processes.

Literature consistently indicates that inclusive universities are shaped by leaders who act intentionally to protect minority voices and promote equal participation.

Shared governance is another important concept connected to democratic leadership and inclusion. Research on organizational quality culture in higher education emphasizes the importance of involving stakeholders in educational design and improvement (Bendermacher et al., 2020). The study found that integrative leadership strengthens collaboration and reduces tension between accountability and autonomy. This aligns with findings that leadership training programs increasingly stress collaboration, communication, and shared authority as core competencies (Evans et al., 2023). When leadership is distributed through committees and participative structures, transparency improves and perceptions of bias decrease. Further analysis of public health leadership frameworks shows that interdisciplinary and systems-oriented leadership supports broader inclusion goals (Rodríguez-Feria et al., 2023a). These frameworks encourage leaders

to consider cultural diversity, equity, and social responsibility in their decisions. The literature suggests that shared leadership reduces dominance by a single authority figure and increases institutional trust. Universities that adopt participative governance models are more likely to institutionalize inclusion because decision making processes themselves become representative. This demonstrates that democratic leadership enhances inclusive practices when governance structures are collaborative and transparent.

Despite strong support for democratic leadership, research also identifies challenges that limit its full implementation. Leadership curricula studies note variability in how participative approaches are embedded within institutions (Korndorffer et al., 2024). Financial constraints, resistance from stakeholders, and institutional traditions often restrict inclusive reforms. Similarly, Abdalla et al. (2024) observed that the integration of socially accountable practices remains slow across many institutions. These barriers reflect deeper hierarchical cultures that prioritize authority over dialogue. Research on Nigerian higher education also shows that although leadership and

management inclusion is widely supported, structural limitations may hinder implementation (Oninla et al., 2025). Such findings indicate that democratic leadership requires sustained institutional commitment to overcome entrenched norms. Inclusion cannot thrive where decision making remains centralized and opaque. The literature therefore positions democratic leadership not only as a strategy but as an ongoing reform process that demands cultural change. When leaders consistently model fairness, participation, and accountability, inclusive practices become embedded in university systems rather than remaining symbolic commitments.

### **Empirical Review**

Sanahuja et al. (2020) examined the effect of democratic and inclusive classroom practices on students' sense of belonging and engagement using a multiple case study of three Spanish primary schools. The researchers found that shared leadership and collaborative decision-making significantly improved students' inclusion, voice, and participation in school life. The study emphasized that democratic leadership fosters equitable participation and mutual respect which are core values of inclusive

education. The study was situated in a Western educational context with supportive institutional structures, which may not reflect the political and cultural constraints faced by Nigerian universities where hierarchical systems often hinder participatory governance.

Mburuki and Thinguri (2022) investigated the influence of democratic leadership on participatory decision-making and inclusivity among public secondary schools in Kenya, using a mixed-method approach involving 199 participants. Findings revealed that democratic leadership enhanced communication, trust, and shared responsibility, leading to more inclusive institutional cultures. However, the study's focus on secondary schools limits its direct application to Nigerian universities, where leadership is often more centralized, and ethnic or political affiliations strongly shape participatory practices.

Setiawan and Janah (2025) assessed the role of democratic leadership in enhancing community participation in village development programs through a quantitative field study in Indonesia. The study found that democratic leadership accounted for 79.7% of the variance in community participation,

showing that leaders who encouraged dialogue and inclusivity achieved stronger engagement outcomes. Although relevant, this study focused on community governance rather than academic institutions. Nigerian universities face unique organizational barriers such as bureaucratic rigidity and political interference that may restrict similar participative outcomes. López-Roca and Traver-Martí (2020) explored distributed leadership in a democratic school in Spain through a qualitative case study examining perceptions of teachers, students, and parents. The research showed that participative leadership enhanced inclusion by fostering collective ownership and cultural dialogue within the school.

Charalampous (2022) examined inclusive leadership within a centralized educational system in Cyprus using participatory action research involving teachers, parents, and students. The study revealed that inclusive leadership improved belonging and engagement among marginalized groups but was constrained by hierarchical governance structures. Bartlett and Schugurensky (2023) analyzed inclusive civic education through participatory budgeting in schools using a mixed-methods approach. The study

demonstrated that democratic engagement mechanisms not only improved inclusivity but also strengthened marginalized students' leadership capacity and trust in institutional systems. Gogoi and Vaičekauskaitė (2025) conducted a conceptual review on inclusive educational leadership using systematic content mapping. Their findings revealed that inclusive and democratic leadership share common goals of promoting equity, social justice, and participation within educational contexts. The study was theoretical, and while it reinforces the importance of democratic leadership for inclusion, empirical validation within the multicultural contexts like Nigerian universities is limited. These studies consistently show that democratic promote inclusion, collaboration, and shared ownership across educational and community contexts (Sanahuja et al., 2020; Mburuki & Thinguri, 2022; Setiawan & Janah, 2025). However, most of these studies are quantitative and descriptive, focusing on measuring relationships rather than exploring the lived experiences and contextual realities that shape inclusive leadership practices. There is also a lack of research within Nigerian universities, prior research has largely been conducted in Western or Asian



contexts with more decentralized systems, limiting applicability to Nigeria's multicultural academic environment. Furthermore, few studies have examined how participative leadership functions as a tool for fostering inclusion among diverse staff and students in higher education. These gaps show the need for a qualitative study that provides in-depth insights into how democratic leadership can be meaningfully implemented to promote belonging, equity, and collaboration within Nigeria's complex university system.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted an interpretivist philosophical orientation. Interpretivism assumes that social reality is constructed through human interaction and shared meanings. The study focused on understanding the lived experiences of university leaders and how they interpret and practice participative democratic leadership in relation to inclusion. Since leadership and inclusion are shaped by context, values, and personal experiences, an interpretive approach was appropriate for exploring leaders' perceptions within their specific institutional environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Jamshed, 2014). The

emphasis was therefore not on testing theory, but on understanding participants' experiences in relation to the study objectives. The study followed a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of university leaders. A multiple case study design was also applied to allow for in-depth exploration of leadership practices across different institutional contexts (Yin, 2018). Six public universities in Southwest Nigeria were purposively selected because they represent culturally diverse academic environments with varied administrative structures.

Participants were selected using criterion purposive sampling, drawing from Patton's approach to selecting information-rich cases. Criterion sampling is a form of purposive sampling that involves selecting participants who meet predefined conditions relevant to the study. The criteria for selection were: (1) at least five years of leadership experience, (2) active involvement in multicultural team management, and (3) participation in institutional decision-making processes (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). These criteria ensured that participants had adequate experience and deep insight into issues of participative leadership and



inclusion. The final sample consisted of 12 participants, including School Deans, Heads of Departments, and Student Affairs Directors. These individuals were selected because they occupy strategic leadership positions that directly influence policy implementation, staff coordination, and student engagement within the universities.

Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews using an interview protocol with open-ended questions. The interview guide was reviewed by senior academics and subject experts in educational leadership to ensure clarity, relevance, and content validity. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify responses and gain deeper insight into participants' perspectives. Sample interview questions included: "How do you involve staff and students in decision-making processes within your faculty or department?" and "What strategies do you use to promote inclusion among culturally diverse staff and students?" Ethical approval was obtained from the Pan Africa Christian University Institutional Review Board, and all ethical requirements were upheld. Participants provided informed consent prior to data collection.

Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms to protect the identities of both individuals and institutions. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were uploaded into NVivo qualitative data analysis software for systematic coding and organization. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step thematic analysis process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed in advance. Initial open coding was performed to identify meaningful units of text. Related codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes. To enhance reliability and dependability, a second independent reviewer examined selected transcripts and coding categories. Inter-coder agreement was assessed using percentage agreement, which reached 85%, indicating strong coding consistency (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. Trustworthiness was further strengthened

through triangulation across the six institutions, member checking to confirm the accuracy of participants' views, and reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This systematic and rigorous process ensured that the findings authentically reflected how participative leadership promotes inclusion within Nigerian universities.

### **Research Findings**

This study investigated the role of democratic leadership in enhancing inclusive practices in Nigerian universities. Participants were university leaders occupying roles such as Heads of Department, Deans, and other academic administrators. Through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, four interconnected themes emerged:

1. Democratic leadership as inclusion in practice
2. Shared leadership as a pathway to cultural inclusion
3. Tensions between democratic and authoritarian practices
4. Social justice and fairness as foundations of inclusion

Each theme reflects how democratic leadership shapes inclusive practices within university settings.

### **Democratic Leadership as Inclusion in Practice**

Participants consistently described democratic leadership as the foundation for inclusive practice. For them, inclusion was not merely a written policy but something enacted through participation, fairness, transparency, and respect for diversity. Many leaders emphasized giving everyone a voice in decision-making. One participant explained that democratic leadership means “giving everybody a voice and opportunities to be heard.” Another noted that before making decisions, leaders must “sample the opinions of others.” These statements suggest that inclusion begins with participation. Leaders deliberately created spaces where staff and students could express their views, sometimes even inviting quieter members to contribute. This reflects an intentional effort to reduce silence and marginalization.

Transparency also emerged as a key inclusive practice. A participant stated, “If I make a decision, I explain the reasons behind it so everyone understands the rationale.” Explaining decisions was seen as a way to prevent suspicion, favoritism, or perceptions of bias. This shows that inclusion is strengthened when leaders communicate

openly and justify their actions. Fairness in treatment was another strong expression of democratic leadership. One leader emphasized, “A leader should treat everybody equally... If I collect it late, I must collect it from all of them.” Others stressed that promotions should be based on merit rather than favoritism or nepotism. Such statements reveal that fairness in assessment, workload distribution, and promotions reinforces trust and belonging.

Recognition of cultural and religious diversity further illustrated inclusive leadership. Participants spoke about accommodating cultural festivals, respecting tribal identities, and ensuring that different groups felt represented. One leader mentioned deliberately pronouncing students’ names correctly and using examples from different regions to ensure representation. These actions demonstrate that democratic leadership fosters inclusion by validating identity and promoting mutual respect. Overall, this theme shows that democratic leadership enhances inclusion when leaders actively listen, communicate transparently, treat individuals fairly, and respect diversity. Inclusion becomes visible in everyday leadership practices.

### **Shared Leadership as a Pathway to Cultural Inclusion**

The findings indicate that democratic leadership enhances inclusion when decision-making is shared rather than centralized. Participants described the use of committees, senates, and departmental meetings as mechanisms for collective governance. One leader explained, “We have committees and senates where issues are discussed collectively before decisions are finalized.” Another added, “I don’t just decide alone; we have discussions with lecturers and agree before informing the HOD.” These accounts suggest that shared structures create opportunities for representation and reduce dominance by a single authority figure.

Delegation was also linked to fairness and inclusion. A participant noted that when assigning responsibilities, authority and duties must be clearly stated to avoid confusion or perceptions of bias. Leaders emphasized distributing tasks equitably and considering competence when making appointments. This indicates that inclusive practices are reinforced when leadership responsibilities are transparent and balanced. Participants also acknowledged the

importance of avoiding tribalism, favoritism, and gender bias. One participant stated clearly that “tribalism kills efficiency,” while another stressed the need to consider gender and disability when forming committees. These reflections show that leaders are aware that diversity must be consciously protected in shared governance systems.

Through shared leadership, inclusion becomes institutional rather than individual. Decision-making processes themselves reflect diversity and participation. This theme demonstrates that democratic leadership enhances inclusive practices when governance structures allow broad representation and collaborative engagement.

### **Tensions Between Democratic and Authoritarian Practices**

Although participants valued democratic leadership, they acknowledged persistent challenges. Some leaders admitted that there are moments when they adopt a more autocratic approach. One participant remarked that sometimes “you have to put your foot down.” Others observed that some leaders perceive democracy as a weakness and believe that once a decision is made, everyone should simply comply. These responses reveal a tension between

democratic ideals and hierarchical traditions within universities. While participative leadership is recognized as beneficial, institutional culture sometimes favors control and authority. Participants explained that fear of inefficiency or loss of authority discourages consultation. In some cases, students and junior staff hesitate to speak openly due to entrenched power structures.

This tension indicates that inclusive practices are not always consistently implemented. Even when leaders understand democratic principles, systemic norms may limit full participation. Therefore, the effectiveness of democratic leadership in enhancing inclusion depends not only on individual intentions but also on institutional culture. This theme shows that while democratic leadership supports inclusion, authoritarian tendencies remain a barrier that must be intentionally addressed.

### **Social Justice and Fairness as Foundations of Inclusion**

Fairness and social justice emerged as core elements linking democratic leadership to inclusive practice. Participants described social justice as equity, impartiality, and protection of vulnerable groups. Merit-based promotion was repeatedly emphasized. One

participant stated, “If you are due for promotion, they promote you, no matter where you come from.” Equal workload distribution and consistent assessment practices were also described as essential indicators of fairness. Leaders believed that when everyone is treated according to clear and consistent standards, trust and morale improve.

Participants further stressed the importance of protecting marginalized groups, including women, persons with disabilities, and minority ethnic or religious communities. One leader described social justice as protecting the vulnerable regardless of gender, tribe, religion, or disability. This highlights the moral dimension of democratic leadership. These findings suggest that inclusion is sustained when fairness is embedded structurally in policies and practices. Democratic leadership enhances inclusive practices by ensuring that justice is not symbolic but operational in promotions, task allocation, assessment, and representation.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study examined the role of democratic leadership in enhancing inclusive practices in

universities. The findings demonstrate that inclusion is strengthened when leaders promote participation, shared governance, fairness, and respect for diversity. These findings are discussed in relation to recent literature (2019–2026). The findings show that democratic leadership enhances inclusion when leaders create opportunities for voice, explain decisions transparently, and treat individuals fairly. Participants described inclusion as a lived practice grounded in listening, transparency, and equity. This aligns with Northouse (2021), who argues that democratic leadership increases member engagement and strengthens a sense of belonging by involving followers in decision-making. Similarly, Fakhri et al. (2021) found that participative leadership promotes trust and psychological safety in educational institutions, which are key indicators of inclusive environments.

Recent studies in higher education also support these findings. Sibanda and Majola (2023) observed that inclusive university cultures are sustained when leaders practice fairness and ensure that all members feel heard. Likewise, Abdullahi (2021) reported that participative leadership practices in

Nigerian universities positively influence perceptions of fairness and institutional trust.

The present study extends these findings by showing that inclusion is enacted through small but consistent leadership behaviors, such as explaining decisions and ensuring equal treatment. This suggests that democratic leadership enhances inclusion not only structurally but relationally through daily interactions.

The findings further indicate that shared leadership structures such as committees and collective decision-making forums play a critical role in enhancing inclusion. When decision-making authority is distributed, representation increases and dominance decreases. This finding supports Dike and Madubueze (2019), who argue that participatory governance strengthens institutional cohesion and inclusivity in higher education settings. Similarly, Cámara and Pareja (2023) found that democratic leadership approaches in educational institutions promote collaborative cultures that value diversity. More recent work by Ratulangi and Piring (2025) demonstrates that shared responsibility in universities enhances transparency and reduces perceptions of cultural bias. Maurice et al.

(2024) also reported that participative leadership in academic institutions fosters equitable treatment and stronger interpersonal relationships. The present study confirms these findings within the Nigerian context by demonstrating that inclusion becomes institutionalized when leadership processes are collaborative and transparent. This indicates that democratic leadership enhances inclusive practices by embedding participation into governance structures.

Although democratic leadership was widely valued, the study revealed persistent hierarchical and authoritarian tendencies. Some leaders still preferred top-down decision-making, especially when efficiency or control was prioritized. This reflects findings by Abdullahi (2021), who observed inconsistencies between participative rhetoric and autocratic practices in Nigerian universities. Similarly, Maurice et al. (2024) noted that resistance to democratic leadership often stems from deeply rooted hierarchical traditions in educational institutions. Schiltmans and Davies (2026) argue that inclusive leadership in higher education requires intentional cultural change, as traditional authority models continue to shape leadership behavior. The present study

supports this argument by showing that institutional culture can limit the full implementation of democratic practices. These findings suggest that while democratic leadership enhances inclusive practices, its effectiveness depends on leaders' willingness to challenge entrenched hierarchical norms. Inclusion cannot thrive where authoritarian leadership persists.

The study also found that fairness and social justice are central to democratic leadership. Participants emphasized merit-based promotion, equitable workload distribution, and protection of vulnerable groups as indicators of inclusive practice. This is consistent with Cámara and Pareja (2023), who emphasize that ethical and equity-based leadership practices are foundational to inclusive educational environments. Ratulangi and Piring (2025) similarly argue that fairness and transparency are critical to sustaining trust and social cohesion in universities. Sibanda and Majola (2023) further note that inclusive leadership in higher education must address structural inequalities to ensure that minority groups are not marginalized. The present study reinforces this perspective by demonstrating that democratic leadership enhances

inclusion when fairness is embedded in institutional policies and daily practices. Thus, social justice functions as both the ethical anchor and practical mechanism through which democratic leadership promotes inclusive practices.

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